

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) – What You Need To Know

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a very contagious disease caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. This is one of the most common vaccine-preventable childhood diseases in the U.S. It's important to remember that both children and adults can get pertussis.

Since the 1980s, there's been a dramatic increase in the number of cases of pertussis, especially among teens (10–19 years of age) and babies less than 5 months of age. In 2007 there were more than 10,000 cases including 10 deaths from pertussis nationally.

Symptoms

Pertussis can cause serious illness in children and adults. The disease starts like the common cold, with runny nose or congestion, sneezing, and maybe mild cough or fever. But after 1–2 weeks, severe coughing begins. Children with the disease cough violently and rapidly, over and over, until the air is gone from their lungs and they're forced to inhale with a loud "whooping" sound. Pertussis is worse for very young children; more than half of infants less than 1 year of age who get the disease must be hospitalized. About 1 in 10 children with pertussis get pneumonia (lung infection), and about 1 in 50 will have convulsions.

In addition, about 1 in 250 people who become infected with pertussis develop a brain disorder called encephalopathy. And in even rarer cases, pertussis can be deadly; the disease causes an estimated 10–20 deaths each year in the U.S.

How Pertussis Spreads

People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. Many infants who get pertussis are infected by older siblings or parents who might not even know they have the disease.

Preventing Pertussis

The best way to prevent pertussis is to get vaccinated. In the U.S., the recommended pertussis vaccine for children is called DTaP. This is a safe and effective combination vaccine that protects children against three diseases: pertussis, diphtheria, and tetanus. For maximum protection against pertussis, children need five DTaP shots. The first three shots are given at 2, 4, and 6 months of age. The fourth shot is given between 15 and 18 months, and a fifth shot is given when a child enters school, at 4–6 years of age. Parents can also help protect infants by keeping them away as much as possible from anyone who has cold symptoms or is coughing.

Vaccine protection for tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis can fade with time. Before 2005, the only booster available contained tetanus and diphtheria (called Td), and was recommended for adolescents and adults every 10 years. Today there are boosters for adolescents and adults that contain tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (Tdap). **Pre-teens going to the doctor for their regular check-up at age 11 or 12 years should get a dose of Tdap. Adults who didn't get Tdap as a pre-teen or teen should get one dose of Tdap instead of the Td booster.**

The easiest thing for adults to do is to get Tdap instead of their next regular tetanus booster—that Td shot that they were supposed to get every 10 years. The dose of Tdap can be given earlier than the 10-year mark, so it's a good idea for adults to talk to a healthcare provider about what's best for their specific situation.